With such surreptitious withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan, leaving most stakeholders including the Ghani government gasping in disbelief, it is not a question of whether but when and how Taliban will formally take over power. Having learnt from their mistakes of 1990s, Taliban is treading cautiously; taking control of northern areas including border posts, and engaging in negotiations first with the US and now with neighbouring nations. Internally, Taliban is in control of much of rural areas leaving main urban centres — that host administrative elites and military garrisons. Obviously, they would avoid direct confrontation with five times larger Afghan National Defence and Security Forces. With sustained internal and external pressure, Taliban will present Ghani government with a fait accompli to stage-manage a façade of peaceful transfer of power. They have even continued with the so-called intra-Afghan Dialogue to ensure legitimacy for their return to power after 20 long years.

This longest war of the US since 2001 has cost it over $2 trillion plus 2,372 soldiers while Afghanistan lost over 47,600 civilians. At its peak in 2011, the US had deployed 130,000 troops for this repeatedly incarcerated nation of 32 million. Now US leaving Afghanistan and its neighbours to the mercy of Taliban is bound to shake faith of its allies and partners. Amongst US friends and allies, Pakistan remains an exception. It played partner for both sides and had its own share of loss. But, in the end, return of Taliban is being seen as a shot in the arm for Islamabad.

After all, much of Taliban leadership had received sanctuaries in Pakistan. China, the other time-tested friend of Pakistan, is widely expected to step in for the US withdrawal; not by sending forces but by using its economic leverages to cultivate political influence. As part of its Belt and Road Initiative, China has already offered an expressway between Kabul and Peshawar to include Afghanistan in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.

This has made India worried about its sizeable investments in Afghanistan and explains why India opened negotiations with Taliban and the Indian foreign minister recently travelled to Tehran, Moscow, Dushanbe to be in touch with Taliban engaging other neighbours that share friendly ties with India. This is also demonstrated in Taliban’s assurance that it will not join Pakistan-sponsored terrorism in Kashmir and responding to India’s reorganisation of Jammu and Kashmir by saying it ‘does not interfere in internal affairs of other nations.’ This is where India has underlined normative discourse in putting an early end to violence and raised question of legitimacy being important to whosoever rules Afghanistan. Such socialisation of Taliban into rules-based discourse promises to help India’s engagement with new rulers in Kabul though India will have only a limited leverage compared to suitors from Beijing and Islamabad. Russia had clarified its caution and US is not like to return any time soon posing serious uncertainties threatening peace and security not just inside Afghanistan but in its periphery as well.

Prof Swaran Singh
Dr. Reena Marwah
UN initiatives in Cybersecurity: The GGE Report 2021

Viewing today’s Cyberspace debates one is reminded of Charles Dickens Tale of Two Cities — that locates London in midst of Industrial Revolution and Paris before and after French Revolution — saying “it is best of times and worst of times.”

In the wake of multiple emerging technologies, Cyberspace today seems to likewise script a new world order. On the one hand, it provides an unprecedented utility for mankind, but on the other, cyberspace has become increasingly vulnerable and conflictual with serious geopolitical implications. The plethora of cyber-attacks portends new power asymmetries, novel offensive cyber capabilities, new ways of silencing dissent, and the creation of new discriminating narratives by the harnessing of cyberspace.

Being the most universal global governance institution with the responsibility to maintain global order, the United Nations has understandably taken upon itself the task of Advancing Responsible State Behaviour in Cyberspace Concerning International Security and, for that purpose, formed a Group of Government Experts (GGE) in 2004 under its First Committee that addresses issues of disarmament in general. The GGE is a UN-mandated body that focuses on cybersecurity. It comprises of a limited number of states; P5 members being permanent invitees and the rest of the seats equitably distributed geographically based on the interest of concerned states. GGE holds closed-door meetings where government officials represent their respective states and all decisions are made by consensus.

Their Sixth GGE Report (2019-2021) submitted in May 2021 carries some valuable conclusions that need the urgent attention of major powers. To begin with, the report reiterates ongoing concerns about the ICT (Information and Communication Technology) threats that have continued to prevail with critical infrastructure becoming increasingly vulnerable to offensive cyber capabilities of states as well as non-state actors. This argument draws support from a recent study published by the Geneva Internet Platform that the number of countries which have offensive cyber capacities reached 53 in 2021. The onus for taking all possible corrective measures, nevertheless, lies with States.

Over time GGE has developed an agreed framework that rests on five pillars. These include, all existing and emerging threats, norms of responsible state behaviour, international law, confidence-building, and international cooperation and capacity-building.

There was strong consensus among the GGE to set higher monitoring standards and strongly reinforce the listed eleven voluntary GGE 2015 norms. These norms lay a strong foundation to address threats like attacks on critical infrastructure, damage to global supply chains, misuse of ICT within state’s territory, risks to human rights, and right to privacy.

The anonymity present in cyberspace makes attribution next to impossible. Their Sixth Report acknowledged how attribution is a complex undertaking that makes comprehensive analysis a must before attributing a cyber offence to its source.

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Further, the GGE also emphasises how, in pursuit of the UN charter, there is a need to empower extant global governance structures to enforce best practices in the ICT domain. Just as established international law applies in situations of armed conflict, there is a need to strengthen international law for cyberspace as well. The 2019-2021 GGE achieved a significant milestone as it accepted the application of International Humanitarian in armed conflict compelling states to avoid developing offensive cyber capabilities with the potential of civilian harm. Both cooperative and transparency aspects of capacity building and areas for effective cyber international cooperation were underlined by the report. Also, the GGE has been credited with two major achievements: one, outlining the global agenda and introducing the principle that international law applies to cyberspace.

In 2018 UN had formed another group called Open-Ended Working Group (OEWG) which complements GGE’s work. There has been an accepted understanding among states and other stakeholders to reach an international rules-based treaty to guide cyberspace. However, a lot of ambiguities remain around the Dual Track negotiations happening under OEWG and GGE. There remains lack of clarity on their Programme of Action (POA) which furthers the idea of ending dual-track negotiations. Many developing countries propose adopting the OEWG approach in GGE as it is found to be far more open, transparent and inclusive in nature. But many states fear non-action if all member states of the UN are to be involved in consensus-based decision making. The almost one and half decade long process of negotiations has frustrated states as there is no global cyber treaty yet in the making. Especially, the major powers, like the US, Russia and China, more or less remain on different pages. For example on the question of how the institutional dialogue should proceed, United States prefers the POA route while Russia favours creation of a new OEWG for 2021-2025.

Meanwhile, all their norms remain non–binding and states have not yet agreed to codify these norms into their national legislations.

The GGE recommends robust national policies, dynamic diplomatic and technical frameworks to guide states to report cybercrimes, episodes of cyber terrorism and address ICT vulnerabilities through interstate cyber security cooperation.

The challenge lies in cyberspace being a moving target; every day new innovations pose new challenges. There is also a big element of secrecy and anonymity of culprits operating in the cyberspace which makes identification and tracking rather tedious. And then absence of unison around the core principles and concepts of cyberspace poses a fundamental challenge. Nevertheless, the opportunities and benefits offered by cyberspace for human welfare and advancement remain unparalleled. Thus, there is great need to constantly learn and unlearn cyberspace which calls for constant cross-communication among various stakeholder organisations. States cannot be the sole actors defining and implementing cyber laws and norms unilaterally to infinite human interactions in cyberspace. Participation of non-governmental organisations and civil society therefore becomes a prerequisite for any comprehensive cyberspace order. The big question is how to build such an inclusive order to create conditions for just and equal use of the cyberspace.
US-China contest over Covid-19 origin and its Implications

The US-China ties have been mired in a complex web of interactions; tense standoffs as well as strong economic interactions co-existing together. Coming to the Joe Biden presidency, high priority is being attached to rebuilding relations with US allies and partners to opt for a subtle approach to addressing its China challenge. Currently, however, their equations have come under stress driven by debates about the origin of the Coronavirus in China that has since engulfed the world including the US.

President Joe Biden has ordered a fresh investigation into the origins of coronavirus by US intelligence to be completed within 90 days which has revived conspiracy theories about the culpability of China’s Wuhan Institute for Virology. Building this pressure further, the US Senate on 26th May 2021, unanimously passed legislation that requires Biden administration to declassify intelligence on potential links between Wuhan lab and the pandemic.

Early this year, two incidents had revived the focus on the origins of the coronavirus. First, a WHO-led mission to China had concluded in March that the possibility that the virus originated in a Wuhan lab was “extremely unlikely” while several independent experts have rejected this conclusion. Several scientific journals have outlined that involvement of a possible ‘leak’ from Wuhan lab which they say was rejected by WHO without adequate evidence.

With 33 million confirmed cases and 600,000 deaths from Covid-19 — the highest in the world — the US, instead of examining its own behaviour, has attempted to ‘scapegoat’ China. President Biden and President Xi are expected to meet in the G20 summit in Italy in October 2021. By then, the US intelligence report on the origins of coronavirus is likely to emerge as the hot topic for their first encounter. China has also blamed the US for the origins of this coronavirus though again there is no conclusive evidence for the outbreak of this disease in the US. For this, just as USA has asked China to share more evidence, Chinese officials have also called for the US to open biological defense facilities at Fort Detrick to impartial global investigation. There have also been demands to punish China economically for their mishandling and cover up of the initial status of the spread of Covid-19.

On 21st June, 2021, US National Security Advisor, Jake Sullivan, was reported saying that China will risk international isolation if it fails to allow a “real” investigation on its territory. The goal, he said, is to present China with “a stark choice: Either they will allow, in a responsible way, investigators in to do the real work of figuring out where this came from, or they will face isolation in the international

Even while the Biden administration has managed to somewhat control the Covid crisis, this investigation marks a stark reminder of how US domestic politics and quest for global leadership continues to push US into grandstanding with China.

Trump had rhetorically called it the ‘Chinese virus’ and criticised WHO’s investigations. Now Biden administration has called upon the WHO to conduct a fresh ‘transparent, science-based study’ of the coronavirus origins.

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community.” In fact, for the last four years of Trump administration, US-China ties were already experiencing strain for various factors ranging from battles over technological supremacy to raising of tariffs. China had also retaliated by increasing tariffs. Trump administration had labeled China a currency manipulator after China’s Central bank let the Yuan weaken massively. Trump had signed Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act and denounced China’s claims in South China Sea as illegal. His Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, had condemned China’s unfair trade practices, intellectual property theft, and human rights abuses and genocide against the Uyghur Muslims, in Xinjiang. As a result, China had imposed sanctions on twenty eight of Trump administration’s former officials including Mike Pompeo.

Beijing has continued with its aggressive military modernisation aimed at making People’s Liberation Army as ‘world class forces’ by 2035. Even when the whole world is reeling under coronavirus pandemic and resultant economic deceleration, China’s economy claimed a growth rate of record 18.3 per cent in the first quarter of 2021 as compared to the last year. This is China’s biggest jump in its GDP since 1992. It’s the only major country to register growth in 2020 despite a tumultuous year taking its GDP to $15.5 trillion. It is just a matter of time for the international community to begin to experience the direct fallout of this on-going political contestation between US and China and what it holds for the future of our world.

References:

China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson, Zhao Lijian, rejected such claims arguing such malicious propositions were “turning a blind eye to the facts” that the WHO-China study had clearly stated that “a laboratory origin of the pandemic was considered to be extremely unlikely”. He accused the Biden administration of using pandemic to pursue stigmatisation of China to shift the blame for their failure.
On 1st February, 2021, Myanmar woke up to a military coup led by the country’s Chief of Armed Forces General Min Aung Hlaing. With democratically elected State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi and the President held in detention to stand trial for corruption and embezzlement, governance fell back into the hands of Myanmar’s military junta. The country has since plunged into severe crises of law and order with nationwide protests and indiscriminate killing worsening its economic downfall with threatening possibilities of a civil war with regional implications.

Myanmar’s decade-long experiment with democracy has fallen aside with military (Tatmadaw) detaining negating NLD’s landslide electoral victory in last November’s general elections. Military has shut off internet access, phone networks, and T.V. broadcasts in multiple areas. It had even stopped incoming flights bringing major cities like Yangon and Naypyidaw to a standstill.

The parliament has been taken over by military cadres, and constitution has been manipulated by Junta. As reported by Associated Press (Win 2021), General Min Aung Hlaing has threatened revocation of the constitution if “the laws are not being properly enforced.”

The lockdown of major cities, military blockades, and tensions in Myanmar’s hinterlands have exacerbated the security and social environment. The UN reports (2021) have noted Myanmarese security forces using heavy weapons on civilians, using human shields, destroying homes and religious spaces, brutal suppressing protests, and conducting summary executions. Peaceful protests have been a key popular response; however, violence by protestors has also been witnessed. Military’s brutality has garnered a backlash along Myanmar’s borders where new armed groups are formed to overthrow the military junta.

Economic pressure due to the pandemic had already resulted in food shortages. A shutdown of the country’s banking sector after the coup has further exacerbated cash scarcity and uncertainty. The World Food Program (WFP) has noted rising food shortage as a key crisis that could affect nearly 3.4 million people (Mcpherson, 2021). The price of staple foods, such as rice increased while aid agencies face restrictions in accessing crucial areas impacting health and nutrition. These present apt examples of violations of international humanitarian laws.

The world expected ASEAN to take the lead in addressing this crisis. In its April 2021 Jakarta summit, ASEAN adopted a Five-Point Consensus...
on the cessation of violence, humanitarian assistance, construction of dialogue, mediation by the ASEAN chair, and a special envoy and delegation (ASEAN Secretariat, 2021).

Yet, in the words of Malaysian Foreign Minister, negotiating with the junta has been “painfully slow” (Faulder, 2021). Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, and the Philippines remain hesitant to speak against the military, signalling a schism within ASEAN. China is another player and Myanmar serves as a key stop in its Belt and Road Initiative that incentivises China to thwart international attempts at economic sanctions or arms embargoes. China has done little to address this humanitarian crisis. Beijing has refused to condemn the military in the name of keeping neutrality which implies collaborating with the Junta. As a result, the coup in Myanmar has unleashed a series of political, economic, and social shocks that risk bringing the country into a civil crisis.

As another close neighbour and economic partner, India holds extensive incentives as also leverages to negotiate with the junta. Myanmar is India’s gateway to South East Asia and mediating for an end to violence remains in India’s interest. In the absence of any progress from ASEAN’s efforts, it may be feasible to tap into regional bulwarks like India for assistance. After all, a strong and democratic Myanmar remains a prerequisite for the political stability of this entire region as also for the sustenance and survival of Myanmar as a nation.

References:
The speaker, Prof Taniguchi Tomohiko discussed China's threat to Senkaku and Okinotorishima, the Islet in Japan as well as the benefits of close cooperation between India and Japan. His statements were futuristic and liberal, as he spoke about China becoming a serious competitor of the USA in multiple arenas. Through interesting visual maps, he tried to explain China's influence on USA, and EU, Russia, Britain, Japan and India.

He illustrated China's intention of ownership of Senkaku and Okinotorishima because the People's Liberation Army desires to be in the deepest part of the Pacific Ocean. Furthermore, China claims 90% of the South China Sea. Japan is encouraged to partner with India more closely to make a tangible presence across the seascape. According to him, this is Asia's Democratic Security Diamond.

According to Prof. Taniguchi, maritime security can be achieved in both East and South China Seas, including the Darwin port of Australia and USA ports but also by improving the sea lanes of communication initiating from the Arabian Sea region across the Indian Ocean through the Straits of Malacca then to East Asia.

The USA's biggest concentration of military power exists in Hawaii and this angle reaches Darwin port in Australia which was leased for 99 years to a private Chinese company, Landbridge. A port facility near Darwin provides bases to the USA's marine core. Shinzo Abe, the PM of Japan, mentioned this 'Democratic Diamond' 80 years ago, now called QUAD. The speech "Confluence of the two seas" delivered by Shinzo Abe in a Parliamentarian address initiated the idea of Indo-Pacific. Although, despite the fact that the Indo-Pacific is less discussed globally compared to Asia-Pacific, it was Shinzo Abe who proposed close cooperation to Dr. Manmohan Singh (India) with Australia and the USA. This was the first proposal made from the Japanese side to India. Further, the co-operation on technologies like A.I., cyber, deep space and oceans, India is much interested in conducting deep space explorations and Japan as well so there is ample space for cooperation. Besides, India and Japan can together focus on developing Joint Defence technologies. He added India can rely on Japan in dealing with China and Russia. The session was followed by a question-answer session.

By Ashmita Deb
Dr. Nishchal Nath Pandey spoke about Nepalese Politics at length, talking about the constitutions and the frequent change of governments in twenty years; twenty governments had changed hands in twenty years resulting in political instability. He traced the history of different regimes and highlighted their strengths and weaknesses. The cross-border dimension was evident in Nepalese Politics, be it the Indian influence of leaders like Gandhi and Nehru or the Naxalbari movement which served as a harbinger of Left politics in Nepal. He also spoke at length about the current political scenario in his country. He underlined that the current constitution was based on the values of Secularism, Federalism and Republicanism. However, he added, that these values had not penetrated the rural hinterland of Nepal, where secularism is considered as Anti-Hindu. In the words of Dr. Pandey, “A Hindutva wave is canopling Nepal and the current Prime Minister Mr. Oli with communist underpinnings is flirting with Hindutva.”

The relations between the two countries however, soured after the publishing of maps by Nepal, which included Kalapani and Lipulekh within the Nepalese side of the territory. It is believed that Oli tilted to China earlier; however, there is a change with a rapprochement with India. He also referred to how K.P Oli had stoked controversy with statements as Lord Rama’s birthplace is in Nepal and that yoga was initiated from Nepal. Dr. Pandey lamented that vaccine shortage in India had prevented India from sending enough doses to Nepal. Initially India sent one million vaccines to Nepal, but due to a ban, people have had to wait for the second dose. He listed various areas where the two countries can cooperate to strengthen both bilateral and multilateral cooperation. This insightful talk was followed by a question- and-answer session, in which there were several queries on the China-Nepal relationship and the possibilities of Nepal balancing relations with both India and China.
Nepal: Sher Bahadur Deuba who leads the Nepalese Congress Party has been elected as the new PM of Nepal. Credit: Al-Jazeera

India: The navies of India and the European Union concluded the first joint exercise ‘IN- EUNAVFOR’ in the Gulf of Aden. Credit: The Hindu

Iran: S Jaishankar met the newly elected Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi in a surprise diplomatic visit to Iran. Credit: The Print

China: The Communist Party of China (CPC) celebrates 100 years of existence. Credit: The New York Times

USA: USA launches air strikes against the Iranian backed militias in Iraq and Syria. Credit: The Guardian

Italy: G20 Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors meet in Venice to discuss on global minimum corporate tax. Credit: Reuters

Iran: Ebrahim Raisi has been elected as Iran’s eighth President. Credit: Al-Jazeera

China: Heavy rain and floods hit China’s Sichuan Province affecting more than a million people. Credit: The Japan Times

Philippines: C-130 military plane crashed in Southern Philippines marking the country’s worst hit military disaster in decades. Credit: CNN

Afghan Taliban seize border crossing with Pakistan in major advance. Credit: TOI
Feedback

“The Association of Asia Scholars hosts regular webinars and it is an honor to be a part of them. The meeting on "Nepalese Politics: Quest For Stability" has strengthened my knowledge and understanding of Nepal's political dynamics. I have benefited a lot from attending this conference and hope that such webinars will continue to link scholars from all over the world together.”

Suppawit Kaewkhunok
Research Scholar, China Institute for Studies in Energy Policy
School of Management, Xiamen University, China

"AAS reflects synchronisation of senior academicians and budding scholars. The webinar titled, Nepalese Politics: Quest for Stability by Nishchal Pandey, for instance, was a classic example of the same. It was such an insightful and interactive session; providing a holistic view of contemporary Nepalese scenario and related Indian concerns."

Chaitra C
Assistant Professor in Political Science
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